

Connecticut College Digital Commons @ Connecticut College

Sociology Faculty Publications

Sociology Department


1-1-1992

(Review) Hierarchy and Trust in Modern Mexico and Brazil

Robert Gay

Connecticut College, rjgay@conncoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/sociologyfacpub>

 Part of the [Comparative Politics Commons](#), [Latin American Studies Commons](#), [Political Theory Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gay, R. (1992). Hierarchy and Trust in Modern Mexico and Brazil (Book). *American Journal Of Sociology*, 97(4), 1149-1150.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology Department at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

For the study of the separation of church and state in America, Carter unmasks the latent fear of religious establishment that was an important motive in separating religion from state in this country. The book suggests that a wilderness beyond the frontier may be needed for absolute religious freedom. The utopian dream of a community *in* the larger society but not *of* it has been a recurring aspiration throughout American history. This book shows why such a dream is unlikely to be realized.

Hierarchy and Trust in Modern Mexico and Brazil. By Luis Roniger. New York: Praeger, 1990. Pp. xv + 236. \$45.00.

Robert Gay
Connecticut College

The past two decades have witnessed a tremendous increase in the volume of research on patron-client relations in the social sciences. This research has greatly increased our knowledge of the many different forms that such relations take in the developing world. It has also dispelled the myth that clientelism is a static, unchanging phenomenon associated with precapitalist social formations. Luis Roniger argues however, that recent research has done little to further our analytical understanding of clientelism as a concept. According to Roniger, recent studies of patron-client relations have been concerned with simple topologies or with the polemics surrounding the debate between those who see clientelism as a form of social solidarity and those who see it as a mechanism of class control. Roniger seeks to overcome the limitations of past research by means of a comparative historical analysis of patron-client relations that is cognizant of structural, institutional, and symbolic commonalities at the macro level yet sensitive to unique combinations of political, social, and cultural variables at the micro level. Roniger claims that his emphasis on clientelism as an active (interactive) struggle over material and symbolic resources allows him to reconcile functionalist and structuralist perspectives and to explain the dynamics of patron-client relations over time.

In chapter 1 Roniger provides the reader with a concise conceptual definition of clientelism and a brief discussion of the economic, institutional, and cultural contexts in which clientelism is likely to flourish. He argues that conditions of economic dependency, hierarchical social stratification, and cultural orientations discouraging active participation in the process of social change lead to what he calls the "focalization" of trust. In chapters 2 and 3, Roniger describes how these conditions led to the emergence of clientelism in Latin America and the institutional context of patron-client relations in Mexico and Brazil.

The bulk of the empirical evidence in the book is to be found in chapters 4 and 5 where Roniger describes and accounts for geographical and historical variations in patron-client relations in the two countries. In the case of Mexico, Roniger compares and contrasts patron-client relations

in the Sierra Norte, in the highlands of the state of Jalisco, and in the state of Oaxaca. In the case of Brazil, he compares and contrasts clientelism in different regions of the Northeast, the Southeast, and the South. He then compares patron-client relations in these rural settings with those among unorganized sectors or urban society, among organized labor, and within the administration and political arena of the two countries. In both cases the analysis begins with the colonial era and ends with recent pressures for democratization.

In chapter 6 Roniger returns to the comparative themes introduced at the beginning of the book. Here he argues that while the core features of Mexican and Brazilian clientelism, in particular those associated with *caciquismo* and *coronelismo* (the most common manifestations of clientelism in Mexico and Brazil respectively) are strikingly similar; there are, however, important differences in "stability" and "solidity" that can be explained by wider institutional dynamics. According to Roniger, patron-client relations in Mexico are relatively unstable in that the position of the *cacique* is under constant threat by aspiring contenders from diverse social origins. This, he argues, has to do with postrevolutionary ideology, with the relative political autonomy and strength of collective actors and with high levels of intraelite competition. By way of contrast, patron-client relations in Brazil are relatively stable. They are less threatened from above and below and, perhaps more important, are more solidly anchored in cultural norms governing social interaction.

The idea of a "shared sociomoral model of interaction" (p. 174) as an essential element in clientelist exchange is a theme the author develops in the next chapter. In chapter 7 Roniger asks that we put aside the more simplistic evolutionary approaches to the study of clientelism that claim a distinction between informal, instrumental, short-term, or "modern" patron-client relations and those of a more "traditional" form. Instead we should recognize that "in most patron-client relations . . . specific exchanges are embedded in long-term, generalized exchanges that offer delayed or reflected benefits, generally in the political and social spheres," and that, as such, "considerations of personal power, solidarity, and the symbolic meaning of both have been relatively more important" (p. 173).

The idea that symbolic aspects of patron-client relations shape commonsense notions of reality independent of structural and institutional change is both useful and perceptive and one that has framed much of the recent debate over the process of democratization and social change in contemporary Mexico and Brazil. The idea that trust and mutual obligation are as important, if not more important, to patron-client relations than coercion and domination is less clear-cut, however, and one that will surely add fire to the polemic the author tries to avoid.

Copyright of American Journal of Sociology is the property of University of Chicago Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.